

## Revolution: Relevance to Contemporary Warfare

by Andrew Rice

*Despite the Soviet Union's demise and the discrediting of communism as a political system, the concept of revolutionary change in society is not dead. Regardless of one's ideology, the conditions for revolution—a term much favored by most 20th-century revolutionaries—will continue to develop as long as there is repression, persecution and disadvantage in society. Likewise, the success or failure of revolutionary war is still determined by the strategy employed. The lessons gleaned from past revolutions will be key to prosecuting future ones, and success will still be measured by the revolutionaries' ability to fit theory to their operating environment. —Editor*

Military commanders, and the politicians who direct their actions, will do well to understand the basis for revolutionary action. While the world may be free of a revolutionary war on the scale of Vietnam, conflicts still exist in countries such as Algeria and Peru. A pessimist would venture that the cyclical nature of history, together with unexpected catalysts as diverse as the rise of despotic governments, economic downturns and climatic phenomena, suggest that revolution may rise again as a key impetus for conflict and change. Conventional forces may encounter revolutionary war in an adversarial sense, when responding to peace support or humanitarian operations to arbitrate between an established government and a disaffected political force, such as in the current work of the multinational force in Bougainville, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea. For these reasons, conventional armies and elected governments must understand the conditions that create and sustain revolutions. This article describes those factors in the context of existing and developing revolutionary theory.

### Strategic Revolutionary Theory

Usually, revolution is associated with the left wing of the political

spectrum. However, ideology is not the key determinant of success. A revolution's impetus comes from popular support for change and a dissatisfaction with the existing form of government. An imperative for a successful revolution is strong leadership and the ability to clearly articulate a strategy for its prosecution. There is also a natural link between a sustainable revolution and the government's relative strength and durability. These environmental factors, rather than ideology, are the key to prosecuting a revolution. We should note that guerrilla warfare and terrorism are merely the revolutionary's tools. Ultimately, success lies in linking methods of violent insurrection to a coherent political strategy.

**Marxist-Leninist School.** The Marxist-Leninist school of thought originated through Vladimir Lenin's disagreement with Karl Marx's contention that the industrialized working class had spontaneous revolutionary tendencies. Lenin saw that these and other disaffected Russians needed firm party control to direct them. Soviets—workers, peasants and servicemen—achieved this and also gave the “masses” a feeling of control of the revolution.<sup>1</sup> Marxism-Leninism provided an essentially urban model which pointed to the working class prompting the revolution and organized bands of activists seizing control of government institutions after a campaign of political action to establish legitimacy for the revolution. The fact that the tsar's weakness, and later the Kerensky government, helped in the model's success was not always considered by later users of the theory.

**Protracted War School.** Mao Tse Tung's prosecution of the Chinese revolution spawned the protracted war school. It is a strategy over which any ideology can be laid. Mao himself adapted Marxism-Leninism to

fit Chinese society's rural nature, using a three-phased strategy:

- **Strategic Defensive.** Revolutionaries build their political organization and support base while conducting a campaign of low-level violence.

- **Strategic Stalemate.** Revolutionaries conduct a guerrilla war to demoralize the government.

- **Strategic Offensive.** Revolutionary forces defeat the government in conventional battles.<sup>2</sup>

Mao also showed it was vital for revolutionary forces to have secure base areas, a devotion to their supporters and strong leadership and clear definition of strategy. Others have succeeded with this strategy, most notably the Vietnamese communists. Peru's *Sendero Luminoso*, or Shining Path, movement adopted a protracted war strategy with some success until the early 1990s, but its situation also shows how much leadership, popular desire for change and the abilities of the government can impact a protracted war's progress.<sup>3</sup> The Philippines' New People's Army (NPA) fortunes are also instructive. A former leader said that despite having a strength of 23,000 in the late 1980s, almost 20 years of activity and a presence all over the country, the NPA remained in the strategic defensive phase.<sup>4</sup> The endurance of the revolutionaries (and their potential supporters) and the government is obviously crucial in this kind of action.

**Cuban School.** The Cuban school argues that it is not necessary to wait for revolution conditions to arise, since armed insurrection can create them.<sup>5</sup> The model followed Mao's line that the revolution should begin in the countryside—in the *foco*, or guerrilla operations zone—and move into the city in the final phase. The school was very successful in Cuba, which was ruled by a corrupt and

weak government and where people were ready for change. However, it provides a good example of the importance of fitting theory to the operating environment. The model did not translate to Bolivia, and the Sandinistas had little success with it in the early days of their revolution, mainly due to the existing government's strength and the lack of public support.<sup>6</sup>

**Urban School.** The next commonly described theory is the urban school, which shows influences from the other three schools. Urban society is seen as Mao's "sea", in which the guerrillas operate. Violent action in the cities is seen as having the same effect on urban society as the Cuban model had on rural people. By forcing a disproportionate government response to acts of terror, the urban school believes that the people can become alienated from the government and ripe for revolutionary action. The theorists did not lose their Maoist roots completely; they saw the revolution being completed in the countryside.<sup>7</sup> The theory, or its principles, surfaced in a number of different environs to include Latin America, Northern Ireland and Europe with little or no success.

**Opportunist School.** The opportunist school provides an overarching strategy for the revolutionary ideology. When poverty, repression, political disenfranchisement and the desire for change exist, and where revolutionaries possess the necessary policy articulation skills to offer an alternative to the status quo, revolutions can prosper, regardless of ideology. It is arguable whether Chinese

peasants knew they were getting Mao's version of Marxism-Leninism—but they knew they wanted change. One might also speculate on how much Russians in 1917 and Iranians in 1979 knew about their respective revolution's ideological agenda. Ideology is of little consequence, as long as the desire for change is satisfied.<sup>8</sup>

The *opportunist* may also seize on the vision of revolution and use its trappings through armed struggle or a public relations campaign to attract international support, to achieve something that is unrelated to ideology. The Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) inserted the middle word in its title with little or no sympathy for any sophisticated ideology. Their intent was to create a rallying banner for those in favor of economic justice and secession for Papua New Guinea.

The various schools of revolutionary thought have provided both strategic and, in some cases, ideological models. However, they developed in response to the specific local environmental factors and they must be adapted to conditions in other locales to be of use.

### Revolutionary Theory's Contemporary Relevance

Revolution will continue to be a viable form of warfare. Poverty is endemic in many parts of the world and there is dissatisfaction with incumbent governments. For example, the NPA still considers that the conditions for revolution—foreign debt, poverty and unemployment—exist in the Philippines.<sup>9</sup> In developing African nations, there are fewer jobs each year for new graduates, a situation which could provide the precursor for revolution.<sup>10</sup> Some Bougainvilleans, who have seen war prevent the delivery of government services, are now so polarized from their government as to be in a constant state of dissatisfaction with the national political authority. Political organization, guerrilla war and terrorism will continue to be viable ways to oppose government power, but success will depend on adapting theory to the social, economic, political and geographic operating environment.

The popular desire for change and a real dissatisfaction with the existing

government remain key aspects for a successful revolution. Mozambique's *RENAMO* found a good deal of popular support for its revolutionary action, despite the *FRELIMO* government's position as the deliverer of the country's independence, because the rural people did not feel *FRELIMO* had the mandate to change the country along urban Marxist ideological lines.<sup>11</sup> However, the European urban revolutionaries of the 1970s and 1980s had no success, because ordinary people did not feel their situation warranted a radical change in the way they were governed. The potential "soldiers of the revolution" need to be convinced that hardship on their behalf will bring an eventual improvement to their lives.

Good leadership and policy articulation are paramount. Strong leadership ensures that the revolution is managed properly, that strategy and reasons for change are explained and the support base stays focussed on the revolution's goals and strategy. The Shining Path's Abimael Guzman was a strong leader who managed the phased application of a mix of Marxist-Leninist, Maoist and Cuban strategies and articulated clear strategic and operational goals that the support base—the rural and urban poor—could understand.<sup>12</sup> Mao, Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh and Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini are good examples of strong leaders as well. The effect of weak or diffuse leadership can be devastating. The NPA lost its way significantly in the late 1980s, when a lack of central control saw purges damage the movement's credibility in its support base.<sup>13</sup>

Revolutionaries must also consider their ability to sustain action. Revolutions rely invariably on the ideological and materiel support of foreign governments. Few have prospered without it, although the 1979 Iranian revolution is a modern example. Internally, a revolution needs to have a support base and access to food, shelter and arms. Paradoxically, the existing government must have sufficient wealth to allow the revolutionaries to siphon off money and arms to equip their forces. For example, the Papua New

*Andrew Rice is the director, External Relations and Legislation, National Support Division, Australian Defence Headquarters, Canberra, Australia. He received a B.A. from the University of Adelaide and a Master of Defence Studies from the University of New South Wales. He is a graduate of the Australian Joint Services Staff College, Canberra. He has served in a variety of positions, including assistant director, Science Intelligence and Information, Strategic Policy and Plans Division, Australian Defence Headquarters, and assistant director, Joint Facilities, International Policy Division, Australian Department of Defence. He served as a civilian truce monitor with the Truce Monitoring Group in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, from late January to late April 1998.*

Guinea government's under-resourced security forces provided only some of the arms the BRA needed to conduct its fight.<sup>14</sup> Geographical factors also play a part in sustaining the revolution. They help the revolutionary forces build support bases away from areas of government control and allow guerrillas to fight regular forces on a more even footing. Vietnam's and Bougainville's jungles, Peru's mountains and southern Africa's bushland are good examples of this.

The government's strength can determine the longevity of a revolution, and it must be a part of the revolutionary's considerations. The Peruvian government made significant inroads against the Shining Path in the early to mid 1990s and Corazon Aquino's People's Power Government captured the initiative from the NPA in the late 1980s.<sup>15</sup> These experiences demonstrate that governments can improve their position over time and that a successful revolution must have strong leadership that is awake to changes in the political and social environment and is able to articulate the reasons for revolution in a contemporary way.

Revolutionary war remains an option for one government acting against another and can go beyond materiel support to ideological brethren. T.E. Lawrence's Arab revolt in World War I is a modern example: the British undermined the Ottoman Empire through fostering revolution among the Middle-Eastern Arabs.<sup>16</sup> US Special Forces have maintained an unconventional warfare capability to foster rebellion and resistance in other countries.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, the Australian Defence Force experimented with the concept in the 1970s, with the Special Air Service Regiment's unconventional warfare wing.<sup>18</sup> However, to move beyond guerrilla war tactics to revolution, a government would need to develop a coherent political strategy, nurture a competent band of revolutionaries and apply revolutionary theory to the relevant target environment.

The factors described above represent the environment that the revolutionary must consider. Shining Path followers have described Guzman as the "fourth sword of Marxism," af-

ter Marx, Lenin and Mao.<sup>19</sup> His mix of Maoist, Cuban and urban revolutionary strategies could be another school of revolutionary strategy as well.<sup>20</sup> Guzman and other revolutionaries, such as the Sandinistas, have adapted existing strategies to produce their own brand of revolution. While revolutionary strategies can guide a revolution, each new environment will prompt their evolution, producing at least an amalgam of existing theories, if not something completely new.

Revolutionary strategic theory provides a useful guide for future revolutions. The Marxist-Leninist, protracted war, Cuban and Urban schools have easily digested concepts and, with the exception of the last school, have success in specific instances as "proof of concept." They are broadly applicable to most revolutionary situations. Nevertheless, the theory will evolve to deal with future revolutions. New or resurgent ideologies, such as fundamentalism and right-wing thought, may devise new strategies that embody their political thinking, their aims and relevant environmental factors. However, one suspects that new strategies would not move too far from the traditional schools' concepts, since they are effective models.

Regardless of ideology, future revolutionaries must be able to recognize the nature of their political, economic, social and geographic environment and be able to adapt existing strategies or develop new ones to suit it. Without this intellectual and practical flexibility, revolutions are doomed.

Nations wishing to protect their national interests and finding them damaged by revolutionary conflict must understand the nature of the revolution facing them and devise effective political, military and, if

possible, social and economic strategies to deal with them. Rarely will a military solution alone succeed. For their part, military commanders on the ground will need to devise tactics that address the revolutionaries' use of resources and terrain and will need to ensure there is a close linkage between military tactics and the overall political strategy.

The deliberate use of insurgencies in other countries to unsettle or damage an adversary will remain a viable means of offensive action. However, just as the counter-revolutionary warrior must understand the basis of revolutionary conflict, governments wishing to use revolutions elsewhere to their advantage will need to understand the limitations and conditions of success. Unless this is done, revolutionary war will remain a two-edged sword. *MR*

## NOTES

1. B.E. O'Neill, *Insurgency and Revolution Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1990), 32-33.

2. *Ibid.*, 34-35.

3. C. Goldsmith, "The Shining Path to Prison," *INTERSEC*, Vol 2, No 5 (October 1992).

4. V.N. Corpus, *Silent War* (Quezon City, Philippines: VNC Enterprises, 1989), 29.

5. O'Neill, 42.

6. D. Nolan, "Focoto Insurrection: Sandinista Strategies of Revolution," *Air University Review* (July-August 1986), 73.

7. O'Neill, 46-47.

8. *Ibid.*, 63-64; S.M. Walt, "Revolution and War," *World Politics*, Vol 44, No 3 (April 1992), 334.

9. A. Lopez, "Running a Revolution: The Life and Times of the Philippines' Most Formidable Guerrilla Chief," *AsiaWeek*, Vol 20, No 10 (9 March 1994), 41.

10. C. Lancaster, "Democratisation in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Survival* (Autumn 1993), 42.

11. R.W. Copson, *Africa's Wars and Prospects for Peace* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 77.

12. G.H. McCormick, "From the Sierra to the Cities: The Urban Campaign of the Shining Path" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1992), 55-56.

13. Lopez, 39.

14. Corpus, 47.

15. Goldsmith, 174; Lopez, 39.

16. J. Shy and T.W. Collier, "Revolutionary War," in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1991), 831-832.

17. H. Halberstadt, *Green Berets: Unconventional Warriors* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), 23.

18. D.M. Horner, SAS: *Phantoms of the Jungle: A History of the Australian Special Air Service* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 399.

19. Goldsmith, 174.

20. McCormick, 90.

**KVH Industries, Inc.** has been selected by Department of the Army to provide key components for the Army's Task Force (TF) XX/ Battle Command Brigade and Below (FBCB2) program's TACNAV™ (tactical navigation system). TACNAV™ is a digital compass-based navigation system designed to consolidate all electronic data needed by an armored vehicle crew. TACNAV™ will provide TF XX/ battle-field commanders comprehensive real-time digital information, electronic coordination and situational understanding through its integrated tactical computer system.

A keystone for TF XX/'s success will be the FBCB2 system's ability to know at all times the exact location of each Army vehicle and unit. Initially, KVH will equip 50 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized), Fort Hood, Texas, Bradley ODS armored vehicles with TACNAV™. These vehicles and systems will undergo an initial operational test and evaluation in Spring 1999.